

What's next? Homelessness poses complex problem

August 23, 2023



Last month's Triplicate article on the horrific conditions lurking behind the massive greenbelt off Elk Valley Road and South Bend dirt road, drew a fair amount of comment.

How best does Del Norte County address the human tragedy ongoing within the Swamp and countless other areas in Del Norte County. Trees grow thick and tall, concealing the sobering existence of humans living in Third World conditions.

Intolerable, incredibly unhealthy sanitary conditions, wanton drug/alcohol abuse and emboldened criminality fester and worsen, daily. The Swamp was not created overnight and candidly won't disappear expediently, despite a massive amount of capital infusion.

California has spent \$17.5 billion over the last four years to fight homelessness. The problem has worsened. This statement was the title of a July 11, CNN report. According to a recent CNN poll, 84 percent of Californians believe the homeless issue is the most pressing dilemma in the state. California spent billions trying to combat homelessness over the last four years, but in that same time frame 2018-22, the state's homeless population substantially grew.

Federal data shows half of Americans living on the streets (or in the bushes in Del Norte County) live in the Golden State. According to the governor's office, 170,000 live in California, hundreds live in and around Crescent City.

Jason Elliott is the senior advisor on homelessness to Gov. Newsom.

“People don’t want to hear homelessness is getting worse. I get it. We got it. We need to build more housing,” he said.

Elliott says the state needs 2.5 million more housing units to effectively stabilize the homeless problem. Elliott did not quantify the cost to build the additional housing units. Many of the public believe the homeless crisis is not a housing problem but a drug and alcohol abuse issue which has created a huge mental illness challenge.

A retired Oceanside police officer wrote an opinion piece stating that exact thesis. Officer Rick Campbell sent a powerful message through Newsweek to Gavin Newsom, earlier this summer.

“There are no words for the horrors I saw,” laments officer Campbell. “Lack of affordable housing is a problem but its not why we have such a huge increase in homeless camps and mentally ill. I believe we have a massive drug addiction crisis and no longer any tools to force anybody to change.”

The former officer related a huge spike in mental illness when the homeless he observed began using drugs. Campbell accused civil rights advocates of standing in the way of reform.

Is Del Norte County powerless to deal with its growing problem of homelessness?

The answer to this complex puzzle is mixed.

The Board of Supervisors has unanimously rubber-stamped every funding opportunity for decades in welcoming state assistance for the Department of Health and Human Services. Have conditions improved with this massive spending spree by DHHS? Apparently not.

Elliott defends the billions spent with the opinion, matters might be much worse if funds were withheld. Elliott identifies fully two-thirds of unhoused as requiring mental illness treatment.

Dr. Margot Kushel is the director of the UCSF Center for Vulnerable Populations. She published a survey of almost 3,200 individuals who are homeless in California. Dr. Kushel was contracted by the state to fact-find the homeless crisis in hopes the data can help fine-tune the state’s response to what Gov. Newsom called “a disgrace.”

Dr. Kushel admits there is no silver bullet.

Community Development Code Enforcement is poised to spend \$50,000 in cleaning up The Swamp, during this fiscal year. The question begs to be asked how long will the area stay clean before occupants re-assault the area behind the trees.

Sheriff Garrett Scott is and remains vigilant and focused on removing criminals who prey on property owners who seek relief from those the DNSD is sworn to protect. The sheriff is working with community development in determining who owns what private property and what property is in the public domain. The

process is slow and tedious but some progress is being made in removing, arresting and prosecuting the significant criminal element among the identified homeless.

Supervisor Dean Wilson who represents District 5 constituents surrounding the swamp continues to lobby his colleagues for a functioning shelter and pallet homes behind Williams Drive.

“These tools are absolutely necessary to remove folks living under these horrific conditions. Criminals must be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. The Board of Supervisors needs to send a clear message to our elected (Sen. Mike McGuire), (Assemblymember Jim Wood), (Gov. Newsom) that the public is being victimized financially, legally and emotionally by the wholesale destruction of our rural county. Matters are worsening,” he said.

Long-standing Del Norte realtor/ businessman Temple Buchanan shared his take on exposing this ongoing property assault. Buchanan was saddened by this “tip of the iceberg” dilemma.

He shared, “...any unprotected wooded area close to services is vulnerable.”

Buchanan identified the location behind the Transfer Station as “...like a Third World country with illegal squatters homesteading .”

He questioned and surmised few were using pit latrines.

“My belief is the situation is the greatest health and safety issue facing our community,” he said.

Buchanan expressed skepticism in the state’s involvement and shared his opinion politicians will only make matters worse.

“I’m ashamed of what we’ve allowed to happen in our community,” he said.

David Markel speaks for many in the county. After examining the deluge of trash, fire damaged vehicles and drug needles amongst human occupation in The Swamp, he shared his observations.

“Nothing is free. Goods and services provided to the homeless are marketed as free. Not true. Continuing to accept state aide with no buy-in merely makes the burden larger. The county buying motels in Crescent City makes no sense. We the public must pay for the damages caused by those who hide behind those trees,” he said.

All parties interviewed agreed conditions are indeed worsening. Frank Ormandi who owns a business near the swamp underscored his assessment.

“Doing nothing is not an option,” Ormandi said.